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Constructing and Enacting Normality Online Across Generations:

The case of Social Networking Sites

Abstract

Purpose

The paper examines how different age groups construct and enact normality within social networking sites (SNS) and consequently aims to extend theory in the area of online interactions.

Design/methodology/approach

The chosen research site was Facebook and the research design involved focus groups across three different age groups: teenagers, young adults and the middle-aged. In total there were 78 participants. The focus groups explored metaphoric images of Facebook interactions. In doing so, participants were asked to draw a picture to represent their metaphor and following this, to position themselves and other characters within the picture. The drawings as well as facilitators' records provided the main dataset for the study.

Findings

Connective and protective encounters were found to be used by different age groups when constructing and enacting normality on SNS. Further, it emerged that the interpretation and enactment of normality across the different age groups significantly varied. The metaphorical images have transpired as being a resourceful way of unpacking these differences.

Research limitations/implications

The study relied on focus groups in order to capture metaphorical images across generations. It did not include interviews with individual participants to elicit the extent to which they

agreed with the group metaphor or whether there was anything else they might have presented in the drawings. This could be on the agenda for future research.

Practical implications

The findings of the study suggest that SNS managers and designers should sympathise with the view that users of different ages engage in different ways with SNS and as a result user interfaces should be customized according to the age of the user.

Originality/value

This is the first study in which the concept of normality has been adopted as a theoretical lens for understanding interactions on SNS. Further, this work adds to the limited body of research on SNS use across different generations whilst it expands on the range of methodologies used within the IS field.

Keywords: SNS, normality, metaphors, age, Goffman, interactions, online, Facebook

Introduction

There has been significant interest over the last few years among both researchers and practitioners in online interactions, and in particular, those within social networking sites (SNS). Important exchanges take place within these sites, of both a social and professional nature, giving the opportunity to members to perform different roles and identities. Nevertheless, existing research on SNS has taken a particular focus on younger users (e.g. Heng-Li and Chien-Liang, 2014; Cocosila and Igonor, 2015) and often undergraduate students, despite the fact that older people frequently use these sites too. We draw on Goffman's interaction order (1961, 1983), with the aim being to analyse how different generations interact within SNS. In particular, using metaphorical representations, we study how different age groups construct normality within SNS.

As fluid spaces, SNS do not have set boundaries nor are the objects that generate them clearly defined (Mol and Law, 1994). This type of fluidity as well as the popularity of these organising spaces makes the notion of normality not only relevant, but also significant to our understanding of day to day interactions among members of SNS. In a fluid space, normality is not static nor monolithic. That is, despite there having been some discussion on social norms on SNS (Papacharissi, 2009; Fox and Anderegg, 2014; Stroud et al., 2015), norms alone do not represent nor solely make up normality. In addition to norms, normality is conceived of as pertaining to values, beliefs and patterns of behavior that dominate a social system by being adopted by its members (Rabikowska, 2010).

Using a series of focus groups with 78 participants in total, we examined metaphoric representations of users' interactions on Facebook across three different age groups: teenagers, young adults and the middle-aged. The study contributes to the increasing body of information systems (IS) research on SNS through the application of the normality

concept, as well as through an analysis of generational differences. Further, it makes a methodological contribution through the use of metaphorical representations in the study of online interactions and these visual images

provide illustrative insights on SNS interactions across generations.

In what follows, Goffman's interaction order and the notion of normality are discussed; these are then positioned and related to the literature on SNS. The research site, Facebook, is presented and the research methods as well as the analytical approach are explained. Following on from this, we present our findings related to the claim of normality on SNS and the heterogeneity within it associated with the age of the users. The results show that normality is actively constructed and that it is different between the different age groups. Finally, the contributions of the study are discussed and areas for further research identified.

Theoretical Foundations: Goffman, Interaction Order and Normality

Normality was first presented in social science as a social construct within Goffman's interactional identity work (1959, 1961, 1983). We explore this work in this section and identify its relevance to our study of day to day interactions in online spaces. Goffman has been credited with enriching our understanding in the field of interaction sociology, which studies the conduct of individuals when they are in the presence of others (Travers, 1992). In his classic work, 'The Presentation of Self' (Goffman, 1959), he discussed how actors interact with others and in doing so engage in performances in various settings for particular audiences in order to shape their definition of the situation. Performance within this context is defined as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (Goffman 1959, p.26). As Goffman put it:

‘when an individual appears before others, his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have’ (p.17), whilst at the same time, the audience, as ‘the others’, also contributes to defining the situation. Thus, actors and audience jointly construct the situation they are in and play a role in the performances that are being enacted. Goffman’s insightful theories on social interactions have gained growing interest among organizational theorists (e.g. Czarniawska, 2006; Mangham, 2005; Manning, 2008). Further, his seminal work has been adopted in several studies on online communities (e.g. Krämer and Winter, 2008; Ross, 2007; Vaast, 2007), and virtual team collaboration (e.g. Fayard, 2006; Panteli and Duncan, 2004; Yan and Panteli, 2011).

Linked to this work on interaction order is the notion of normality. For Goffman, normality is a critical component of interaction order. It has been defined as the ‘what ought to be’ within a given social system (Ryan, 2011, p.1047). According to Goffman (1961), normality is a social construct that is achieved through the interactional relationship between community members. Its primary principles are twofold, first, it is a result of a collective achievement among the cohabiting members of a community (Burns, 1992). Second, it is a protective mechanism that can be used to prevent chaos and disorder, thus leading to safety and comfort. As such, with normality, there is a working consensus, a harmonious agreement that supports the establishment of social order (Goffman, 1983). Mintzal (2001) has taken this point further to argue that normality has the power to build continuity in social structures and to create opportunities for trust development; her point being that normality promotes feelings of not just safety, but also of familiarity and predictability. In doing so, it contributes to sustainable as well as trustworthy social structures (ibid). Similarly to trust, normality is fragile, as it can be challenged by changing situations.

In an exploration of normality and its effect, Mintzal (2001) added that this social construct has a processual character, that is, it is through a series of interactions that it is

achieved. This process might indeed render abnormalities and uncertainties, but with appropriate adjustment, conformity and acceptance can be achieved. In a sense, it can be said that this process for normalisation is intentional. That is, cohabiting members collectively and purposefully attempt to overcome uncertainties and abnormalities in order to construct normality.

Empirically, normality has often been understood in relation to the abnormal. That is, whilst the latter is what is considered by the majority to be out of the ordinary and unacceptable, the normal refers to what is generally acceptable. For example, if the abnormal involves dangerous extremists and anarchists, the normal refers to moral honourable citizens (Yang et al., 2007; Ryan, 2011). More specifically, normality has been studied in terms of stigmatised people (Goffman, 1983), stigmatised countries (Adler-Nissen, 2014), the disabled (Olin & Jansson, 2009), the homeless (Smith, 2011) as well as minority groups and migrants (Ryan, 2010, 2011). A similarity that we find across all of these studies is that those groups who may be described as ‘abnormal’ or ‘not so normal’ in relation to a specific community or system, can achieve normality when in their interactions with others show conformity and acceptance of the institutional roles and standards (Goffman, 1961). A further similarity in these studies is that normality is articulated as monolithic. That is, there is just one form of core normality that the cohabiting members, regardless of age, gender or race aim to conform to and the stigmatised and minority groups try to adjust to. Despite there having been recognition of the malleable character of normality (Ryan, 2011), no previous study has viewed its heterogeneous nature and what this means for different age groups. This, in our view, is an important aspect of how interactions are formed and developed within an organising space, both offline and online.

In contrast to previous studies that adopted this Goffmanian construct, we have not examined the cases of abnormal members of a community and their attempt to be normalised.

Instead, we examine how people who would consider themselves ‘normal’ carry out their day to day interactions in SNS. As SNS are populated by diverse users of different ages, there needs to be an understanding of the heterogeneous sides of normality and what this means for the different groups of cohabitants. Regarding this, researchers have argued that communication and interaction within SNS is different to other online media, such as web pages, online chat and email, which “allow the initiator complete control over what appears in association with his-or herself.” (Walther et al., 2008, p.29). In contrast, in SNS, self-presentation and interaction order are much more a joint affair with contributions from cohabiting members taking the form of wall posts, comments, or photographs being linked to the user’s site (Back et al., 2010).

As argued earlier, claiming normality provides protection and predictability especially in fluid spaces like SNS that render uncertainty. Accordingly, within this context, where there is increased flexibility and mobility both in terms of users and interactions (Panteli, 2009), we examine how is normality constructed. In view of the online context of our study, but also existing literature, we define normality as a socially constructed phenomenon that represents commonly approved shared practices and routines among the cohabiting members of an organising space, such as SNS. Drawing from existing literature and notably the works of Burns (1991) and Mitzal (2001), in our exploration of normality, we seek evidence of two interrelated types of exchanges that constitute the approved shared practices and routines:

1. Connective exchanges: online interactions that show harmony and familiarity, including practices and rituals that build links among members;
2. Protective exchanges: online interactions that promote safety, ease and predictability.

This study aims to explore interactions in SNS across different generations using metaphorical representations. In what follows, we present the chosen research site and the methods adopted.

Facebook and Generational Use

Facebook is our chosen research site. This online space has become highly ingrained in the lives of people all round the world, where using the site has become daily practice for millions of people. Existing literature has provided insights into how and why users engage with the site (Joinson, 2008; Lampe et al., 2006), the effects that using it have on social and psychological variables (Wilcox and Stephen, 2012; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013), and identity (Zhoa et al., 2008; Back et al., 2010). Furthermore, paralleling the quickly spreading adoption of the site across the globe, there is a growing body of research that addresses cultural differences (Vasalou et al., 2010). However, generational differences have not been sufficiently explored by the existing body of research on SNS. This is an important subject area as since Facebook went public in 2006, membership has been steadily growing beyond the aforementioned initial university student demographic, becoming widely used across different generations. That is, people of all ages are increasingly using Facebook to socialize with their friends, provide social support, share views and interests, and to maintain a greater level of continual involvement in the lives of others than was previously possible (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Statistics show that for US Internet users, 89% aged 18-29 years, 82% aged 30-49, 65% aged 50-64 and 49% aged 65 and older, have a Facebook account (Pew, 2014). Similarly, reports show that Facebook's popularity is surging through older generations partly fuelled by the greater use of mobile devices (Sutter et al., 2013).

Broadly, much of the work that addresses the context of SNS has employed university samples (e.g. Cocosila and Igonor, 2015; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), because this age range

represents the largest proportion of users as well as being easy to access by researchers. A few papers have examined generational differences, for example, Pfeil et al. (2009) found that older Myspace users' connections were more diverse in age than those of younger ones and they were less likely to interact with the additional features of the site, such as videos. Research into Facebook has found that older users have less Facebook 'friends' than their younger counterparts and are less active on the site, spending a higher proportion of their time viewing their own profiles. Moreover, they participate in interactions that are more directed at individuals, and spend a greater amount of time engaging in content associated with their family (McAndrew and Jeong, 2012). Further support for the negative association between age and activity on Facebook is provided by Christofides et al. (2012), who found that teenagers spend more time on Facebook than adults. They also showed that teenagers report higher levels of information disclosure and lesser adoption of privacy settings than adults (ibid). Similarly, Hayes et al. (2015) found that younger adults use Facebook more frequently and are significantly more emotionally impacted by the site than older ones. For example, the former spend more time per day on the site and experience greater negative body image because of Facebook than do the latter. These findings highlight the need for more research into the effects of SNS on individuals of different age groups and individualized intervention methods for SNS-related problems. On the other hand, Leung's (2013) investigation into the usages and gratifications associated with personality type, "found no generational differences in the use of Facebook and blogs as means to satisfy social and affection needs." (p.1004). The existing studies that have examined cross-generational differences in SNS usage provide valuable first insights. With this paper, we extend theory in this area by adding a qualitative perspective to cross-generational differences in this domain.

Research Design

The use of metaphors was adopted in order to enable us to explore the interactions enacted online by members of different age groups. Numerous studies have discussed and shown the importance of metaphors in understanding organizational phenomena, for they are key features of our language and communication practices. They act as a ‘compass’ that provides orientation in interpreting phenomena (Hart, 2003). Moreover, they help to articulate our understanding and express our thoughts and views on a particular phenomenon using existing characters, behavior and imagination. Weick (1979) posited that metaphors supply the language through which we can express our thoughts. Consequently, they remain widely popular among researchers as investigative tools and are often used to improve learning, facilitate the creation of new knowledge and give insights to a phenomenon that has not been previously well understood (Cazal and Inns, 1998; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Tsoukas, 1991, Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990; Ortony, 1975). Moreover, metaphors can advance theoretical understanding in organisational research due to their ability to capture multiple salient features of the phenomenon under investigation (Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008). Within IS research, metaphors were used in studies on IS design and implementation (Ciborra, 2004; Jackson, 2016; Kendall and Kendall, 1993), in exploring the nature of virtuality (Schultze and Orlikowski, 2001) and to research online spaces (Robards, 2010). The current study adds to the limited number of studies that have used metaphors as the methodological approach in the IS field.

Research Methods

Carrying out focus groups was the main method employed in our investigation. As a type of qualitative research, they involve a small group of people who are brought together to discuss a specific topic guided by a facilitator in an unstructured and spontaneous way (Fern, 2001). They are used in research to stimulate discussion and to further understanding among the participants. Research has shown that focus groups are particularly useful when generating metaphors, as during the discussion one person builds on and adds to those of the other participants (Kendall and Kendall, 1993). Thus, within such a discussion, others' verbalised experiences can provide opportunities to crystallise each individual's views on the subject at hand as well as to stimulate memory. Focus groups are advantageous as they allow for metaphoric ideas to be subjected to criticism, negotiation and in some cases, consensus within the group (Yuen, 2004). Furthermore, their use aligns with the notion of interaction order as a collective achievement to which all members contribute and make sense of. When SNS interactions are investigated, it is not uncommon for researchers to use offline methods, such as focus groups or interviews, as in the case of Velasquez et al. (2014). This approach that links the offline to the online world has been deemed insightful as participants can influence the interpretation of the data and how their use of SNS is understood and analysed (Sade-Beck, 2004).

Data were collected using focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to uncover metaphors that participants gave to Facebook, to examine the meaning of these as well as to explore how participants saw themselves as well as others and the interactions with them. Focus groups, ranging from 4-6 participants, took place between March 2012 and May 2013 and involved three age groups: 15-17 (teenagers), 22-26 (university students/young

adults) and 50-60 (middle-aged users). Six, six and five focus groups from each age category, respectively, took place and in total, 78 participants took part in the study. The three age groups were chosen for convenience due to accessibility reasons. Collectively, they provided us with the opportunity to compare different views and experiences of Facebook across different generations as aimed by the study. Each focus group was facilitated by a moderator and guided by a list of questions. This approach not only led to uniformity in data collection, but also provided a record of the discussion. The facilitator was also taking his or her own notes during and after the focus group, each of which lasted between 60 to 90 minutes.

The facilitators began by asking the participants to describe Facebook in relation to a metaphor and a list was presented to them at this point: marketplace, club, zoo, jungle, playground, festival, home and family. The need for a stimulus list emerged from preliminary discussions with numerous Facebook users, many of whom agreed that this would be useful for stimulating discussions on how users perceived the site. Such a list was consequently co-created with a sample of users who took part in the preliminary study of this project. During the focus groups, it was made clear by the facilitator that this list was not exhaustive and that each group could identify additional metaphors (“Are there any other descriptions you can give to Facebook that do not appear on this list?”). The participants initially discussed a number of metaphors providing reasons why these would be suitable for explaining Facebook. Following this, they were asked to reach an agreement among themselves about the most suited metaphor for the site. Also at this stage, the facilitator asked them to draw a picture to represent their metaphor and following this, to position themselves and other characters within the picture.

This approach where participants are asked to draw a picture and interpret it for the researcher is not uncommon in metaphor-related research. As Oswick and Grant (1996) noted, such a visual approach “offers the potential for glimpses into unarticulated feelings

and attitudes” (p. 221). Moreover, drawings have been shown to be effective vehicles for expression (Barner, 2008). For example, Zuboff (1988), in one of the most widely cited works on the role of computers in office environments, used the drawing method in order to uncover the emotions, views and experiences of new technology in the workplace. Similarly, Tracy et al. (2006) used drawings in their investigation of bullying in the workplace. In our study, the drawings were primarily of a scene in a selected metaphoric space (e.g. children in a playground or animals in a zoo). Participants were then asked to present their drawing to the facilitator who asked questions for clarification: *What does this picture mean? Where are you in this picture? What does this - pointing to a particular element in the picture - stand for?* Each group was also asked to comment on generational differences with regard to the use of Facebook: *Do you think that people of different age groups than yours (e.g. your parents) see Facebook differently? In other words, would they give a different metaphor to Facebook than you?* Throughout this process the facilitators transcribed details of what participants said and after the focus group had finished, they wrote a thorough description of the discussion and their own reflections. The drawings and the facilitator’s field notes contributed towards the main dataset of this study.

Initially, the data collected were categorised according to the age group of participants. Within each category, the preferred metaphors were identified and studied in terms of the drawings provided. Images 1-3 show exemplars of visual representations of the designed metaphors. The descriptions provided by the participants and the discussion that took place around these provided insightful data on what these represented and the participants role within them.

Insert Images 1-3 about here

In the data analysis, we aimed to understand “what types of metaphorical language do participants use to describe their interactions on Facebook?” In answering this question, the data were further analysed in terms of props, actors and actions/interactions. Table 1 shows a summary of the findings, and in particular the different metaphors developed as well as the various exchanges perceived and experienced within each image. Although normality was not a priori theme in this research, it emerged at this particular point of the analysis and therefore, post hoc from the data collection: ‘it is normal’ was a sentence repeatedly used in the focus group records. Following from this observation in our data, we sought for evidence of approved shared practices and routines. This evidence was then categorised into connective and protective exchanges as per our definition of normality, which was developed earlier in the paper. Tables 2 and 3 present the results of this analysis.

Insert Table 1 about here

Metaphorical displays of day to day interactions in SNS

Metaphors provided a valuable lens through which to explore everyday interactions. That is, they proved to be an illustrative and resourceful way of describing what users saw and encountered online. According to Table 1, different metaphors were preferred by the

participants of the different age groups. As such, the findings present in diverse ways the labels given to the different roles, actors and interactions within this online organising space.

One of the first observations of the data collected is that even though both spatial (e.g. playground, club) and relational (e.g. family, home) metaphors were presented to the participants, it was found that those preferred were predominantly spatial (e.g. playground, social club, zoo, jungle, pub). Although space itself has relational characteristics (Beyer and Steyeard, 2012), its affordances for open and flexible endeavours were probably more relevant to the participants of this study than a purely relational investigation. That is, it was this openness and flexibility that enabled the participants to give their preferred metaphor a shape and character that suited their own needs, desires and interpretations. For some users, this was *their place in the sun*, or their playground, pub or club, where they could go and meet their friends and family, have fun playing various games, watch other people and show off through self-presentational activities.

Among the teenager groups, a playground was the most frequently mentioned as being the preferred metaphor, which resonated with the fact these participants were all still in school. This metaphor was particularly liked by those in this group as it gave them the opportunity to uncover different types of identities being enacted in the different types of people who may gather in the playground, some of whom were uninvited (e.g. the bystander stranger or parents). The metaphorical images drawn by the teenage groups showed a lot more activity and labels as well as a lot more actors, actions and interactions than the other age groups. For example, TFG6 participants, who settled on the zoo idea, because “*they could use the animal idea, to have them on display, like people are on Facebook*”, identified numerous animals and the roles they represented:

“The monkeys represent attention-seeking people on Facebook who make loads of statuses...

The flamingos represent the slutty people on Facebook who don't do much on Facebook but put up revealing photos that loads of people like.

The hippo is a lazy person who never goes on Facebook.

The zebras represent the people on Facebook who post really annoying stuff in an attempt to be cool and indie.

The peacock represents vain people on Facebook who just put up multiple photos of themselves for attention.

The lions fighting in their cage represent bitch fights on Facebook. Their cage is right in the middle of the zoo because these fights get so much attention on Facebook... (TFG6 participants)

Detailed descriptions of the different encounters on Facebook were presented by other groups too, as shown in the example below:

TFG5 started off by considering the club metaphor, comparing the private areas of Facebook to the VIP areas of clubs, and how you dress up and try to look nice for going clubbing to how you try and make yourself look hot and exciting on Facebook. However, they eventually settled on the jungle metaphor because jungles are busy places, and different animals could represent different types of people on Facebook. They thought it was better than the zoo metaphor because it was in a wilder, less well controlled setting (TFG5 facilitator's notes).

In the cases of young adults (Table 1), it is noted that no single metaphor dominated this group. Nevertheless, the different metaphors (pub, zoo, adventure park, school playground, café, vacation) share some key characteristics: their core activities are those of socialising, networking, entertaining and being entertained. It emerged from the discussions that although a 'marketplace' (e.g. selling and buying) and 'playground' (e.g. gaming)

represented part of the experience of Facebook, these did not encapsulate its true essence for this age group:

We agreed on a pub as the metaphor for Facebook. There is a bar where people go to take their drink and meet new people; the place where networking takes place...There are also several tables with groups of friends sitting together and enjoying a night out; a fight among a couple of people making fool of themselves with bystanders watching; a karaoke giving the opportunity for people to perform. Also, a cash machine representing Facebook credit. A TV screen showing football matches/sports with spectators. An entrance with a bouncer checking who goes in and out. A person sitting on his own in the corner watching everyone else... (YAFG1, participant).

The groups of middle-aged users consistently and independently agreed on the social club metaphor (Table 1), being viewed by them as a social space, often an exclusive one, where they went to meet family and friends. For instance, MUFG1 chose this metaphor to show that Facebook was a place that enabled them to communicate with family members and close friends. Notably, there was no mention of networking and making new friendships. That is, the social club was seen as a close community where most participants knew each other and thus, they shared their interests, showed family photos and talked about special events in their families or close circle:

One said it was like a social club but it was like a jungle around it, because the club is where they like to be and they like to ignore or keep the junk-ish things outside (unwanted friend requests, or annoying commercial communications). (MUFG2, facilitator's notes)

Collectively, the images gathered of the metaphorical representations of Facebook were enriched with the use of props (e.g. tables, karaoke, bike shed), actors (e.g. zookeeper, employers, loners) and interactions (e.g. stalking, bullying, playing), showing not only the

multi-dimensional characters and labels given to the various users, but also the open, lively and fluid nature of this online space. In what follows, we examine these findings through the normality framework, which entails both normal and abnormal encounters, with the former meaning the connective and protective exchanges of commonly approved and shared practices, whereas the latter refers to the disapproved and isolated exchanges.

Encountering abnormalities

As understanding of the normal has often been through the abnormal, in this section we explore the abnormal acts and behaviors in our attempt to identify the normal. Following from the definition of normality as approved and shared practices and routines, abnormality is sought in terms of disapproved and isolated encounters. In the metaphorical images, instances of abnormal acts and behaviors were talked about and displayed. In some cases, the abnormal individuals were inside the social space that was mapped out by the participants, trying to capture what was going on or to develop relationships with the normal members:

The snake represents the stalkers on Facebook who “slither” around profiles (TFG6, participant).

The explorer discovering the jungle is like parents on Facebook; they don’t really fit in or know how to use it, but they have a good look around (TFG5, participant).

In other cases, however, these were outsiders:

There is a creepy looking man on the edge of the playground, showing the dangers of stalkers/paedophiles that there are on Facebook (TFG2, participant).

The playground was surrounded by a fence. It was noted that the fence was low and quite flimsy, showing that privacy settings are limited however high you put them. Outside of the fence is a stranger, and possibly has malicious intentions of what they would do if they got through the fence. (TFG1 facilitator's notes).

Similarly, within the social club metaphor, some members were pointed out as showing off, and exhibiting themselves in a way that was not acceptable by the majority:

There is a dance floor in the club, although the group members said they were not on it as they preferred to sit around the tables. On the dance floors as illustrated are people who like to show off. (MUFG1 facilitator's notes)

Among the younger groups, however, this kind of showing off and self-presentation was considered to be a common encounter and therefore, approved. As will be explained in the next section, instead of choosing to distance themselves from such encounters, they were in fact choosing to be part of them. The above quotations indicate members' awareness of unacceptable encounters and behaviors by, not themselves, but the 'others', the 'strangers' and the 'weirdos' (participants' own words). That is, they were asserting themselves as the normal ones who were distancing themselves from the disapproved others.

Claiming normality online

Within all the focus groups, we were struck by the repeated claims by the participants that their encounters were normal. Tables 2 and 3 summarise the different but interrelated elements of normality described in terms of connective and protective encounters. We use the term connective exchanges to denote the extent to which practices and rituals were established that brought participants closer together. The data in Table 2 indicate that SNS users can develop connective exchanges by joining like-minded groups, sharing the same

facilities with the cohabiting members of their group, sharing information and by networking in order to meet new people and make new friends.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

The metaphorical images that emerged from the focus groups, such as for example those of the playground, pub and social club, are representative of the different age groups studied, notably, teenagers, young adults and the middle-aged, respectively. The participants acknowledged that they had a preference to be with people of the same age as them as they shared similar interests, lifestyles, norms and values. It follows that their preference was to develop and maintain connections with like-minded individuals, as by doing so, they could interact with ease and reassurance of the nature and quality of the interactions. This preference to be with others of the same age shows a sense of normality represented in the act of familiarity. Mintzal (2001) explained such constructions of normality with reference to trust. She posited that in such connective encounters where there is familiarity, there is more predictability and reliability and hence more trust. This argument is consistent with the trust literature (e.g. Lewicki and Bunker, 1995). Connection and familiarity were further reinforced by sharing, not just the same space (e.g. playground), but also the same facilities, such as swings, tables, the karaoke stage etc. as well as by disseminating information about themselves and their families.

Goffman (1971) highlighted the role of rituals in promoting not only a sense of collectiveness, but also continuity and ultimately, a sense of normality. For the middle-aged users, the use of calendars, fund-raising activities and the sharing of family or holiday photos,

could similarly act as rituals for promoting connectivity and establishing normality online, whilst maintaining continuity with aspects of their offline life: ...*There is a message board where you read about other people....Facebook was also very much linked to special events hence a calendar is drawn, the participants said they liked to celebrate special events in their club, birthdays, Xmas, weddings etc.* (MUFG1 participant). Networking was an additional social exchange that enabled the development of new connections. This was more notably so in the case of young adults and was displayed in their metaphoric images: *Enjoying a drink at the bar shows an interest to make new contacts* (YAFG1 participant).

Further to connective encounters, as explained above, the second principle of normality entails protective ones. As shown earlier, the participants turned out to be well aware of abnormalities online and dealing with these involved a number of different strategies. In Table 3, we illustrate the different elements of protective encounters online: interacting with familiar people, adding security guards, enacting the role of a security guard, social distancing from the different others. As noted, connective and protective encounters have an interrelated character. As such, connecting with like-minded individuals also has a protective character. That is, by enacting the familiar, perceptions of safety and trustworthiness are being created in the minds of users (Mintzal, 2001). In this way, they feel secure as they know who they are dealing with and therefore, can open up and share personal stories, dramas, recipes or photos.

The use of gatekeepers or security guards at the doors was often talked about and displayed: *There are bouncers at the door who check who goes in and out* (YAFG1 participant). Among the TFGs and YAFGs, this protection was provided to them by a third-party, e.g. their teacher, the zoo or park manager. In contrast, middle-aged users who presented themselves as social club members, made direct attempts to act as the bouncers on the door:

The group viewed themselves as the person that allows people into the club, akin to the security or manager. There is an active members-list which are their friends and they have the ability to “suspend” others: ‘This is my club I can allow people I like in and if I don't like them anymore I can kick them out’. (MUFG1, facilitator’s note)

These quotations suggest that even though the groups recognised dangers (e.g. strangers and unwelcome visitors, low fences in the playground, cracks in the walls of the social clubs that enabled strangers to look in), they were able to be at ease, remain calm and carry on with their presence online. In essence, even with these dangers at hand, there was a sense among participants that things were normal.

Such protective encounters suggest a process of social distancing that has often been expressed in the ‘them and us’ differentiation. There are two dimensions of such distancing that we witnessed: first, normal users wanted to distance themselves from the abnormal ones and the strategies identified above illustrate how this could be done. Second, users made a conscious attempt to keep themselves separated from other age groups: *I wouldn't have my children in my social club*’ (middle-aged user). Likewise, younger participants had a choice to join the family table in their parents’ social club, but instead they preferred to be in the pub with other younger people. There was recognition that younger users (e.g. children) were part of different groups/spaces online and away from their parents’ social club: *Our children have their own club where lots more goes on; we don't want to know what goes on in there, it would be a lot of a dance club* (MUFG2 participant).

Our findings reinforce this point that, indeed, there was a lot more happening within the locales of the younger generations:

There are various friendship groups in the playground, each representing a stereotype on Facebook. There is a group of gossipers (the people who gossip on Facebook), a group of

posers (the people who put up loads of pictures of themselves), the needy couple (talk about their relationship a lot on Facebook) and a group of cool kids (people who get a lot of comments and likes on their status' etc.). The people climbing the climbing wall by the cool kids are the social climbers, who always comment on and like the cool kids' photos on Facebook... (TFG, participants' description).

All of the group placed themselves within the park but none identified themselves with a particular person. They were all on the monkey bars, all used the roundabout regularly and had all been in the sandpit. None of them had been down the slide. (TFG1 facilitator's notes).

The group saw themselves as being 'normal', but couldn't define exactly what this meant. One group member suggested that the normal people were the ones who have a little of each other's character trait, so gossip a little, pose a little etc. Another group member added the "socialisers", who walk between each group in the playground, and interact with each stereotype on Facebook... (TFG4 facilitator's notes).

In the quotes above, it can be seen that for the younger SNS users, the enacted normality involves them enacting multiple and diverse roles. In fact, just being associated with one type of role, label or behavior was not considered normal. When such practices of role exchange are approved and shared by the cohabiting members, then normality can be claimed. In fact, by claiming normality in a way that encapsulated flexibility in the roles and labels undertaken, there was a sense of excitement: *I am a bit of everyone; I may be the bystander watching the fight; networking at the bar and sitting with my friends enjoying a drink; or the person at the karaoke (YAFG1 participant).*

In contrast to this malleable character of 'how it is to be normal' among the younger age groups, the older users expressed a more rigid view of normality. These groups talked

about selectively choosing their friends on this site: *I wouldn't have my colleagues as my friends on Facebook*' (MUFG3), while another participant (MUFG5) commented that *'most of my family are in X country [the home country], Facebook allows me to get to know what my nephews and nieces do and what my cousins in the US are up to, otherwise I wouldn't have known*. Accordingly, even though there were similarities among the different age groups regarding the use of connective and protective exchanges that enable the construction of normality, the interpretative frames (Orlikowski, 1992) that sought to enact it would appear to be different. In what follows, we discuss these findings and identify the contributions of the study to the wider literature.

Discussion

In this paper, we used Goffman's lens of normality (1983) and developed a conceptualisation of it that comprises connective and protective encounters. The study offers metaphorical insights into SNS encounters across different age groups. A diverse set of metaphors has emerged from the data displaying in some cases rich interactions among participants and in others, limited and repetitive ones. In all cases, however, there has been evidence of the commonly approved and shared encounters which revealed the claimed normality.

The outcomes of the study are consistent with earlier research on the pliable and malleable nature of normality among different groups (Ryan, 2011). On Facebook, there isn't just a single normal life. Users have been found to appreciate the freedom and flexibility available to them within this fluid SNS space and therefore, construct and enact normality in the way most suitable to them. In this online space, 'what is normal' is a result of users' interpretative frames. In one instance, the act of showing off, which was considered abnormal and disapproved of among the middle-aged group, was found to be normal among the

younger users to the extent that doing so (e.g. being on the karaoke stage) for them was a routine encounter. Accordingly, even though multiple roles and labels were being enacted among the younger users, older users were found to endorse normality in a more conventional way that entailed conformity to their own traditional offline norms of interactions. Nevertheless, despite their differences, the three age groups constructed normality using similar frames of reference. That is, they produced collective, protective as well as abnormal encounters, thus revealing their own co-created processes of adaptation, role enactment and interplay of interactions within the online space. It follows that the first contribution of the study is that it extends the theory on SNS interactions by taking account of Goffman's interaction order. In particular, we contribute to theory in this area by positing that normality is a relevant concept in our understanding of SNS interactions. Studying normality in the SNS context not only shows how chaos can be avoided in massive communities and when in the presence of the unknown others, but also how shared understanding can promote a sense of order and predictability among those involved. The findings indicate that this shared understanding and commonly approved practices have been achieved when users joined like-minded groups.

Further, this study contributes to how online interactions are shaped by the age of the user. Drawing from Leung (2013), who found that no generational differences exist in satisfying social and affectional needs as regards the function of SNS and Facebook in particular, we tend to agree that it does indeed fulfill these needs for all ages, albeit in different ways. Middle aged users perceive Facebook as a relatively subdued place and use it less self-consciously than do younger ones. The former use it for connecting close, offline, friends and family and they are noticeably in charge of their own domain. Teenagers and young adults, on the other hand, see Facebook as a highly vibrant space with constant role switching, the need for impression management and for capitalizing on connections beyond

those they would deem as strong. It follows that the way normality is enacted online across the different age groups mirrors how offline encounters reinforce, on the one hand, extant practices of social interactions and on the other, assert generational differences. Extant research has either treated users of online spaces as homogeneous in terms of age, or have taken a particular interest in younger (e.g. teenagers) rather than older users. Our view is that since users of online environments come from different age groups, age becomes an important lens through which to explore social interactions online. Despite our study not having directly adopted the perspective of age identity, the fact that our participants represented different age groups has provided us with the opportunity to carry out cross-age comparisons and to fill in some of this gap in the literature. That is, the findings clearly show that normality is enacted differently by different age groups, with multiple roles and interactions being performed by younger users of Facebook, whilst family orientated interactions and identities are found among the older ones. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude that enactments of normality are mediated through notions of age identity.

Further, a third contribution of this study is with regard to the use of metaphors as a methodology in examining IS related phenomena such as when investigating roles and interactions online. No previous study has captured interactions in online spaces using the visual metaphor approach. Some studies have investigated metaphors of the web in general (e.g. Ratzan, 2000; Pablo and Hardy, 2009), but not specifically those of social networking communities. As normality can only be understood in terms of interactions (Goffman, 1983), asking participants to present their experiences and perceptions of Facebook using metaphoric visual images was an appropriate approach in our study. Metaphorical images, such as those of jungle, zoo, playground, pub and social club, to name but a few, have given useful insights as to what goes on within SNS and have provided an explanation of their use across different generations. It is readily acknowledged that the metaphors presented a

selective domain of activities as these were perceived and chosen by the participants of the study. It might be therefore the case that other activities have not been talked about or displayed in the metaphoric images. Nevertheless, metaphors have offered the opportunity to capture interactions online as no other study has previously done. Through the metaphors, participants could shape not just the images themselves, but also the space within which they exercise their day to day encounters. In doing so, they not only reached a shared understanding of the affordances of this space, but also co-created the space in order to make it meaningful to them. More broadly, the study adds to the range of methodologies that can be adopted to examine IS-related phenomena.

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, we studied a specific social networking community, Facebook, which was presented as an emergent type of an organising space with limited boundaries, pertaining to social as well as security systems. Within this fluid and boundaryless environment, users have been found to develop ways to enact a sense of normality through collective and protective exchanges in the online space. Participants were asked to engage in a process of metaphor development and in doing so they identified their own processes of adaptation and negotiation of roles within this vast online space. Normality is a socially constructed phenomenon with a multifaceted source of meaning and therefore seeking alternative ways for uncovering it is important as it cannot always be expressed verbally.

On reflection, although we believe that this brought in important advantages in the process, such as the representation of multiple salient features of SNS, which according to Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008) can lead to ‘better’ metaphors, the limitation of our approach is that the individual voice and views were not captured beyond the focus groups. In

other words, we did not interview individual participants to see the extent to which they agreed with the group metaphor and if there was anything else they might have presented in the drawings. Combining focus groups with interviews would give the opportunity to participants to narrate their experience (Tracy et al., 2006). A further limitation of the study is that its focus has been on the selection and identification of the preferred metaphor at the time of the study. Consequently, further research should probe whether there is retention of these metaphors over time or whether, with time, individuals develop new metaphoric representations of SNS. Moreover, in this study we did not account for all age groups (e.g. 30-45; or over 60s), nor for gender or education. These characteristics should therefore be on the agenda for future research on SNS interactions.

From a practical perspective, the findings of the study would be of particular interest to those working in the cross and intergenerational research domains. Further, with regards to SNS managers and designers, the outcomes of this research suggest that sites should sympathise with the view that users of different ages engage in different ways. That is, it would be advantageous if their user interfaces were, to some extent, customized by the age articulated by the user. Such customization can help the process of normality by emphasizing familiarity and restricting abnormal activities. For example, this could involve a news feed dedicated to family connection for older users, or alert and guides for privacy management for young users as they progress through different life phases (e.g. college to work). Finally, with emergent organising forms on the rise, managers should encourage the sharing of experiences among employees in order to provide an outlet for both connective and protective encounters to be exercised.

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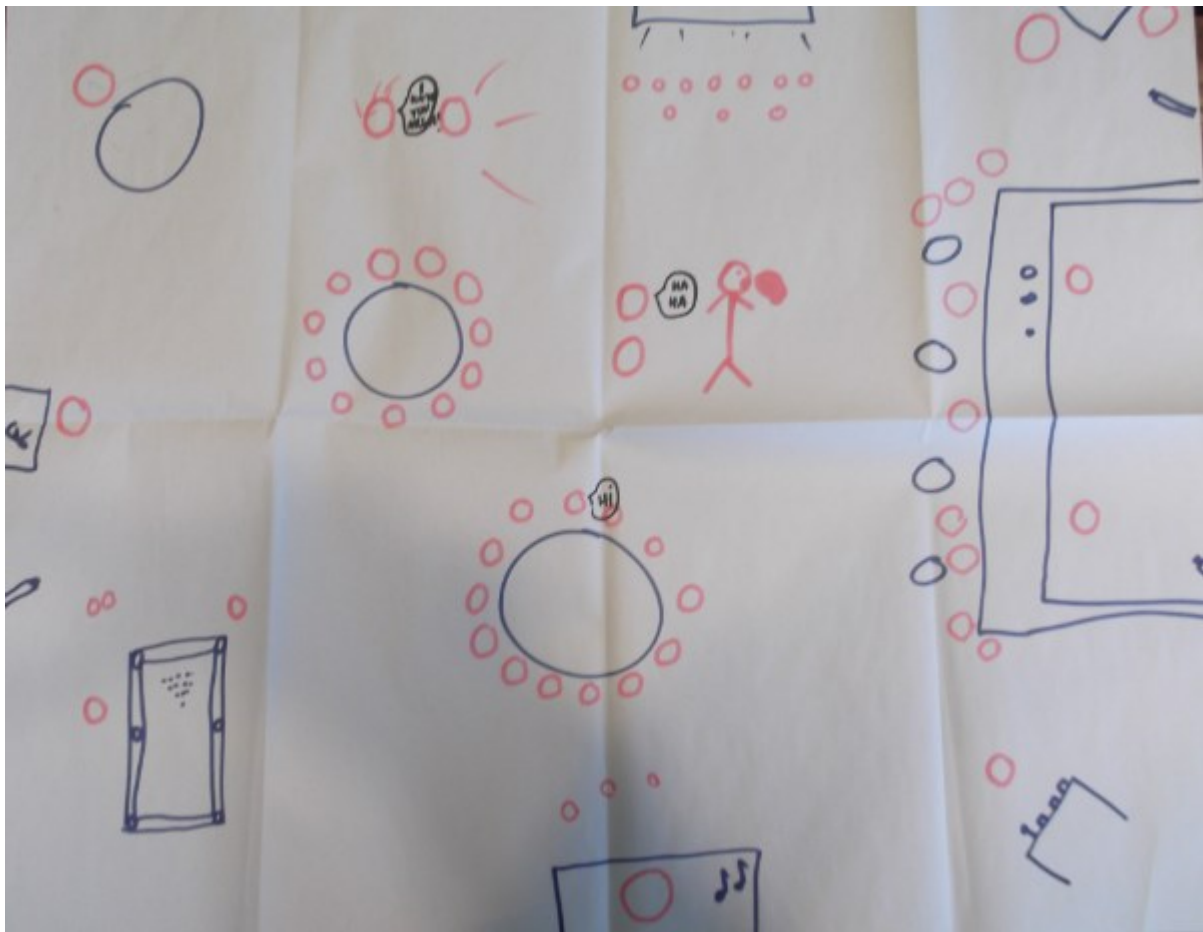


Image 2: Exemplar of Young Adults' Pub Metaphor

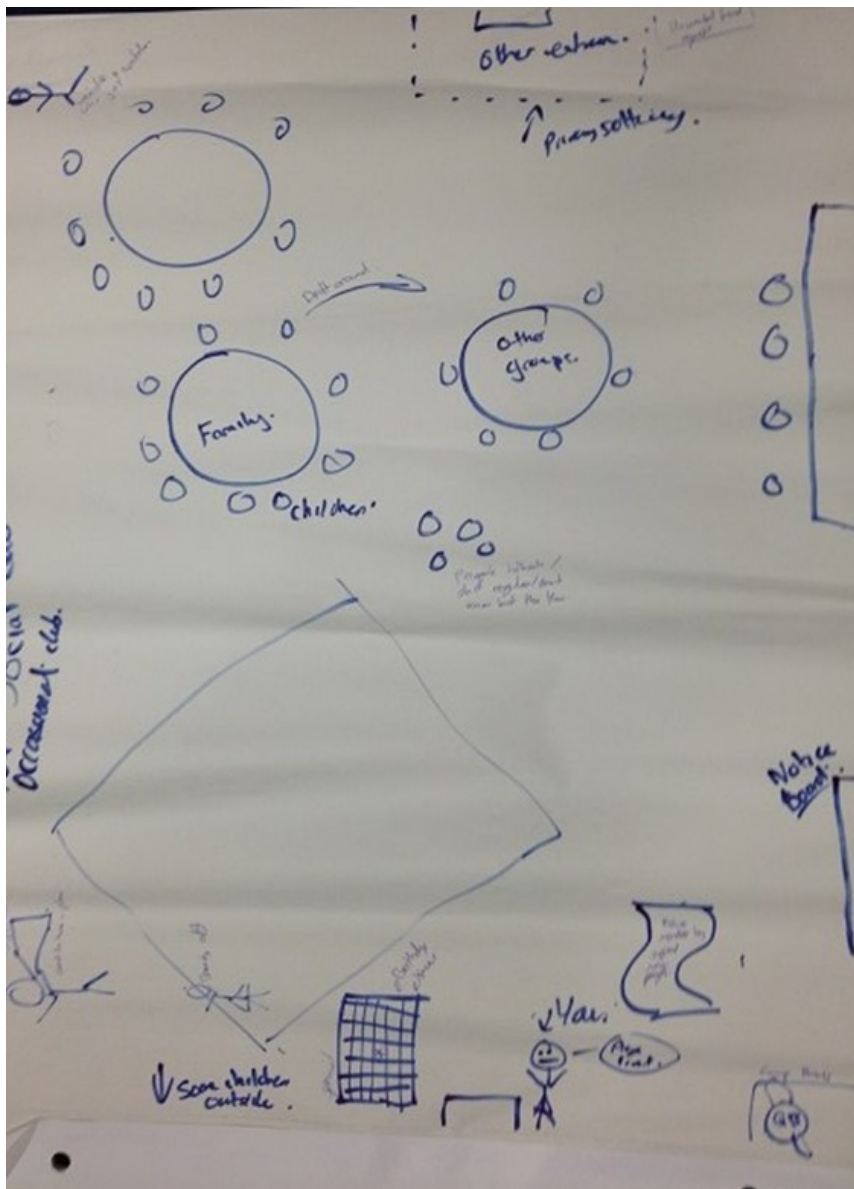


Image 3: Exemplar of Middle-aged Users' Social Club Metaphor

Table 1: Summary of Metaphorical Images Across Ages

	TFGS	YAFGs	MUFGs
Preferred Metaphors	Playground Zoo Jungle	Pub Night Club Vacation Zoo Amusement Park Playground	Social Club
SNS interactions	Chatting Playing Celebrating Fighting Uploading photos Fighting Bullying Sharing music Showing off Annoying others	Meeting friends Singing Playing games Showing off Networking at the bar Fighting	Socialising with family Socialising with friends Donating Celebrating special events Showing off, Dancing

Table 2: Collective Exchanges in Online Spaces

Connective Exchanges	Sub-concepts	Description	Source of Evidence
	Joining like-minded groups	Bonding, playing and being entertained and entertaining together	TUFGs, YAFGs, MUFGs
	Sharing the same facilities	Sitting at the same table; having a drink with friends at the pub	TUFGs, YAFGs, MUFGs
	Sharing information	Showing holiday & wedding photos and information on upcoming events; sharing music, sharing personal dramas	TUFGs, YAFGs, MUFGs
	Networking	Sitting around the bar-area to have a drink and meet new people	YAFGs

Table 3: Protective Exchanges in Online Spaces

Protective Exchanges	Sub-concepts	Exemplars	Source of Evidence
	Interacting with familiar people	Choosing to be in places with like-minded people, for these are likely to be known to them and therefore 'normal'.	TFGs, YAFGs, MUFGs
	Adding security guards to their images	A bouncer at the entrance of the pub; a teacher in the playground	TFGs, YAFGs,
	Enacting the role of a security guard	Actively protecting the entrance of their own club by being the bouncers at the door	MUFGs
	Social distancing from the different 'others'	Keeping abnormal users out of their space	TFGs, YAFGs, MUFGs